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Spring

# *The Vehicle*

*spring 1999*

# The Vehicle

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Spring 1999 vol. 40 No. 2

Editor

Denise Fitzer

Associate editor

Catherine Eilers

Layout coordinator

Racheal Carruthers

Cover design

Kathryn Kolasinski

Editorial adviser

Greg Hecimovich

Student Publication's adviser

John David Reed

Printing adviser

Wilburn Hutson

Reading staff

Kathy Bayley

Maegan Kirby

Daniel Fitzgerald

Annie White

Anna Leal

Heather Delabre

Wendy Lehman

Brian Langford

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Eastern Illinois University

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# Eve's Daughter

---

I am Eve's daughter.

In grocery stores I seek out the apples,  
their skins thick blood, and shining rubies  
the sweet juice dripping  
off my chin from stolen bites.

At the zoo I go to the reptile house  
listen to the whispering hisses of the snakes.  
They tell me secrets older than God.  
I unlatch their cages and wind the  
slick bodies about my neck, knotting in my hair.

At night I go to bars  
luring home drunken men  
I tangle them in my sheets  
tie them to the bedposts and  
feed them slices of Granny Smiths,  
the juice making the knife slippery in my hand.  
Their broad velvet tongues  
wiggle with the crisp sour taste of knowledge.

**By Sylvia Whippo**

# When We Wore Canoes On Our Shoulders

---

The man before me has scars  
on his face, like the markings  
pirates' lances make.  
He lifts his wet finger to winds  
and thumb to his brow against the sun.  
His face blisters and freckles,  
peeling away as if shed scales.

The man I love holds fish like servants,  
hoisting hooks from their swollen mouths.  
He tells tall tales of fishing,  
for northern pike, not "those foul-tasting bull heads,"  
through the boundary waters of Minnesota,  
before I threaded line  
in the boat beside him.

I also remember, as a girl,  
hot wooden boards for docks, burnt feet,  
and the sea monster I thought I'd stepped on  
after my mom threw me off the landing.

My legs grew longer each year on the tire swing,  
my sisters and I slapped mosquitoes  
against our thighs and parted the grainy scum  
to swim on the lake.

Those humid days fevered my mind,  
when shells cut my feet  
and sand lingered in the corners of my lips.  
The sun fish littered the beach,  
taking tiny gasps.

Some days I still string together sun fish,  
some days northern pike, while  
my hands knot line  
and handle the gutting knife.

He casts beside me  
and his tales  
are also mine.

By Mandy Watson

# This Is Not a Poem About Grandpa

---

Even though I  
wrote it  
at five AM  
after I got back  
from my last trip  
to Joliet  
where I sat  
on a blue vinyl  
couch for five hours

Wishing that I could go  
again to woods  
in the dark

Hearing his grin  
tell me how  
I could climb up  
and get it down  
and Mom  
would make soup,  
if we treed a possum

And Jenn cried  
at home  
because she said  
her grandpa  
used to smile  
all the time too

**By Jake Tolbert**





# Old relationships

---

I had a dream  
about you  
two nights ago.  
It was not  
a nightmare,  
but felt  
comparably close.  
You sat down  
at the kitchen table,  
and told me why  
we were never  
really in love.  
So calm,  
and righteous,  
trying to be just.  
It seems  
that you forgot,  
justice  
was my department.  
So, every time  
you spoke  
of the  
ethically correct,  
I laughed.  
Your head  
swelled up  
at the kitchen table.  
It turned bright  
pink-orange,  
then popped.  
After sweeping up  
the crushed pop cans  
from your brain,  
I don't think  
you will  
have to worry  
about us  
being together  
anymore.

By Brandi Kinney

# Bravery

---

You stood naked  
against a backdrop of dark green curtains  
that paled your skin  
having finally removed your blue boxers  
and white cotton socks.  
I watched your fidgety hands  
trying not to cover yourself  
the dark, soft hair on your arms raised and obvious.  
A pile of clothes rested next to your feet  
first your shirt and pants, the too long cuffs  
frayed, permanently stained with dirt  
last the underwear and socks balled up on top.  
I saw you glance at the pile  
asking yourself how I convinced you to do this.  
I knew you thought sex would come after,  
a reward for bravery  
like the shiny metal badges given to soldiers.  
It would, not as a reward  
but as a gift, a deep amethyst, to look into and lose our way  
if you could first trust my eyes to  
see your incongruous symmetry.

By Sylvia Whippo

# Untitled

---

Standing in window  
pretending  
trying to force him onto glass  
out of obsession  
hovering over a radiator  
eyes irritated.

By Erin Winner

# deep dark closet

---

i don't like my body with your body.  
i don't know how i came from you.  
your permed hair, two decades too late.  
an unnatural, cringing fit,  
me curled in your arms.  
i loved my bottle.  
i would not take succor from  
your stinging poisoned breast.  
letting your juices inside me  
tears my innards, drilling little holes.  
your dry cracked hands  
slapping down on my satin lining,  
that incased my bleeding organs.  
Smoke, everything Stenched  
Yellow, Reeking, hiding my  
quivering lips  
that suck the tears from my fleshy cheeks.

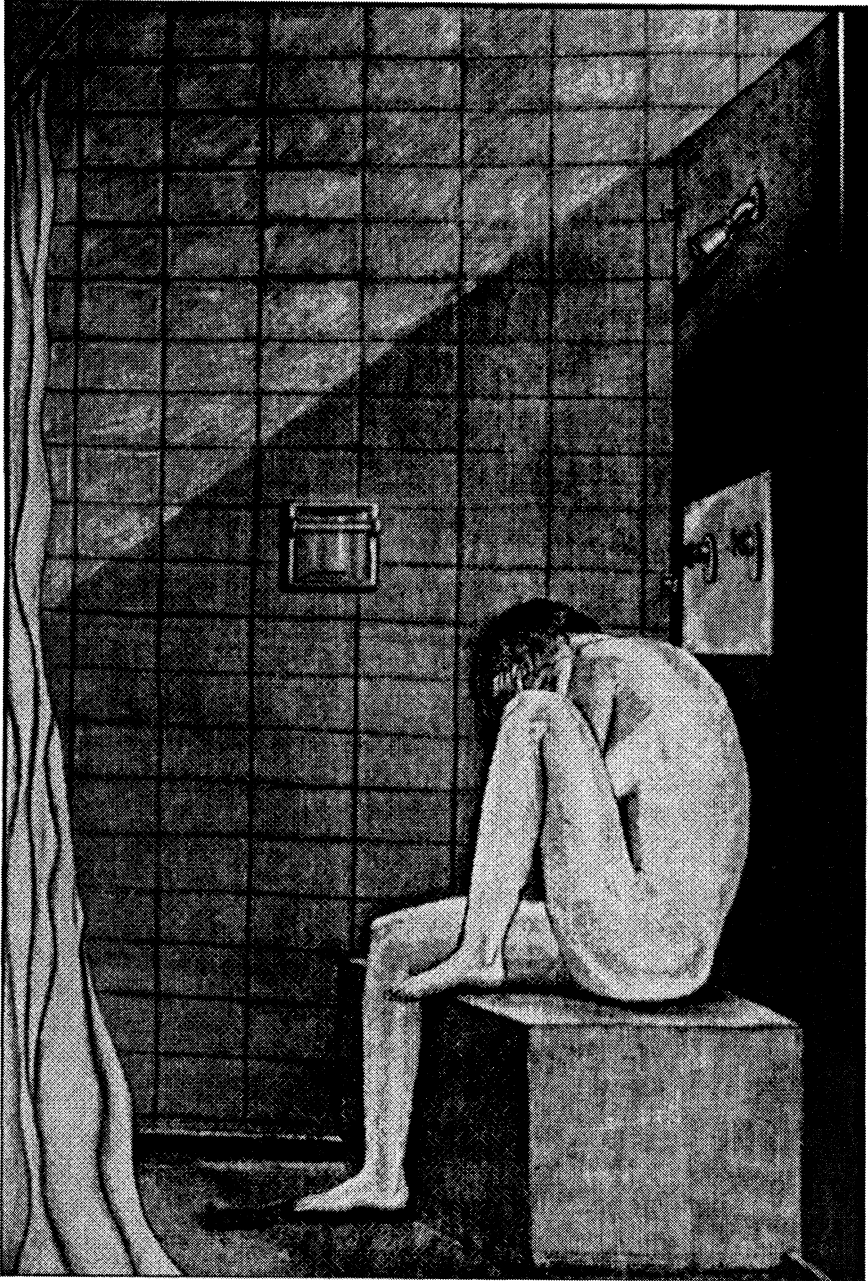
I love hiding in deep dark closets.

Where my body and your body  
do not exist

**By Nicole Smith**

# Meditation

---



# Belly Earth

---

In a daydream  
my belly was swollen  
and that sweet, ripe curve  
cradled a secret  
a little girl crouched in  
the rich belly earth  
between craggy cliff hipbones  
her tears pooled in my pelvis  
she told me that she hid in my belly to cry after  
the rough spit stung her face  
because her daddy called her a bitch

she was warm inside  
under the tender clutch of my hand  
when I woke  
the viney nest fed by  
her tears was empty  
a smooth flat plain under the  
canopy overhang of my weakened ribs  
but supple and ready  
for the huddled remnant  
of sour stings  
and ancient nights

**By Tara Coburn**

# The River and Fire

---

From my raft, I can see the eternal  
sun, burning with a full-meal open fire  
to touch all the sharp edges of limestone  
with soupy sky water, sweet peppermint  
on my tongue and my happiness immune  
warming smooth rocks next to an ice river

The ice numbs my fingers in that river  
flowing lightning down, a fast eternal  
roller coaster, eyes squirrel-like, immune  
in my brain to the threat of drowning, fire  
in my lungs and throat now; air is peppermint  
in my mouth now, down this canyon of limestone

My alert eyes focus on the white-washed limestone  
torn and kissed by the strong and rough river  
my hand tight, like sticky wet peppermint  
on the paddle, carried by eternal  
weight, force, not me, nor what I know: the fire  
that beacons alone, to the wind, immune

My fire sits solid on the hard ground, immune  
to wind and water, close to the limestone  
that leaves black char and little sticks and fire  
dust blowing away, wind like the river  
forces unstoppable, so eternal  
pulling, too, easy, too smooth peppermint

Breath of God, cool like past peppermint,  
coursing through my body, makes me immune  
to hunger and snarls and growls eternal  
of darkened dreams and soul-heavy limestone  
controlled, carried beyond, by the river

---

that empties deep, fast into the fire

Consume me, give me courage, light and fire  
my soul, burn away sugar peppermint—  
sickly sweet—wash me clean in the river,  
holding tight, and making me immune  
to the current's pull, as hard as limestone  
Fire, make me, bathe me in you, Eternal

There has come the fire to make me immune  
soul sweet peppermint, and heart hard limestone  
deep in the river, baptized eternal

**By Jake Tolbert**



# Untitled

---

Mother, Father, Sister—  
You knocked but no one answered.  
I hid in the bathroom  
Coiled, choked.

Mother, Father, Sister—  
You knocked but no one answered.  
I had gone out  
To build a nest of dead things:  
Shredded leaves,  
An empty cigarette pack,  
And three flameless lighters.

Mother, Father, Sister—  
The door fell from its hinges  
Screws scattered across the floor  
My nest shattered by air

I had gone out to use death over—  
Hand-feeding vultures  
Acidic food  
Dripping  
From bruised  
Fingertips.

**By Autumn Williams**

# Action Potential

---

Shivering across

(down?)

my axon- soma relaxes

beads of sodium

(or potassium to be negative)

drip, dr-

ips off dendrites

heading for relaxation

only until action

(potential, all or nothing)

no tetanus-plateau-

no passage to a synapse

WHERE DID THE IMPULSE GO?

To then search

search

search

falling through a node

of Ranvier

slipped, no exchange here

(I should know better-

your synapse is

singular)

travel back

tripping over reverse reactions

backs, back to a

new Receptor

(internally in-

side)

**By Kim Evans**

# Chimerical

*a song for children*

---

The Gypsy, the Alchemist, the Spring Heeled Jack  
Sat around all snicker-snack  
Paint it orange, paint it black  
Gypsy, Alchemist, Spring Heeled Jack

Spangles and euphoria  
Deus Excelsis Gloria  
up & down the dream train track  
Gypsy, Alchemist, Spring Heeled Jack

Scam Man, Ad Man, Spring Heeled Jack  
In the red, in the black  
Stole it once, stealed it back  
Witch, Wardrobe, Spring Heeled Jack

Uncle Siggy Freudian  
Snake has got his legs again  
Went for dinner, got a snack  
Manson, Piltown, Spring Heeled Jack

**BY D.M. Attrape**

52.



# Untitled

---

Little one was driven  
from bed by chaos  
knocking at her temples  
and resistance rising  
in her chest.

Fooling Mother, an imposter  
lay sleeping soundly—  
the one Mother caught  
by the shirt-sleeve—  
the one who seemed  
to have stronger arms  
for treading water  
where discerning  
reflections dilate,  
waver,  
recede.

Pressures seek release  
where the sealed rock cracks.

If only relieving suffering  
wasn't the way to realize  
what feeling good feels like—

If only the broken-winged  
hadn't slipped  
from suspension  
in solitude  
and the little girl,  
who leaped from the ledge  
hadn't landed softly  
inside herself.

---

If only,  
then ignorance  
could restore  
sand-stone shores  
of happiness.

On reality's  
concrete skull,  
a spiraling crack  
appears—

**By Autumn Williams**

# Untitled

---

You held me in your hand  
But I slipped into the lines of your fingerprint  
You started to look frantically  
Like looking for a lost contact  
Meanwhile I'm still in your hand  
Swimming in oil and sweat  
After a short time you gave up  
And said they were disposable  
It's easy to replace  
I cried out obscenely  
Trying to get your attention  
But the squeaks faded too quickly  
Giving up you readied yourself to move on  
Looking through the window towards the rising sun  
Pushing your nose against the glass  
Palms up  
Pressed flat and spread  
You peeled away  
And saw what you left behind  
Your print, your mark  
Your oil, your sweat  
And me  
Smeared across the glass  
Unrecognizable  
Even to you

**By Matthew Armstrong**

# Building You

---

Daughter I wanted you to be strong  
so my love became a heavy stone  
to strengthen the muscles of your shoulders and soul  
a purer image of my grainy flesh

When strangers whisper compliments of you  
I feel my belly and breasts swell with pride  
How could I allow you to see this  
hiding it a careful secret  
in the dark, moist cavern of myself  
I was wrapping you in thick  
scratchy bandages of independence

Daughter I have layered you in love  
smoothing clay over your peach pit core  
building a dark temple  
you will stand unending as redwood  
a fortress against my terror of sensitivity

Your eyes cannot conceal the rebellions  
you hoard behind them  
hard pebbles for remembrance  
you collected them over the years  
one for each necessary harshness  
the edges smoothed by the actions of water  
so that they will click softly in your hand  
the day you trickle them into a waiting stream

**By Sylvia Whippo**



# Running

---

You always keep  
the water running  
as we brush our teeth,  
together, over separate sinks

I brush in silence  
as your faucet runs  
echoing off the normally  
mute tile

And I can not let it continue.

I reach over,  
turning off the water;  
slapping your forearm  
because my mouth is full of toothpaste

toothpaste burning  
my delicate cheek tissue;  
I never stopped  
for pain makes you happy.

I use it and you won't complain of my breath  
from the cigarettes  
I purposely smoked  
to blow halos in your face,  
being ignored at the bar.

Why  
the reason I brush  
before you can go to bed,  
smoke stuck in my nose.  
I decide to use your mouthwash

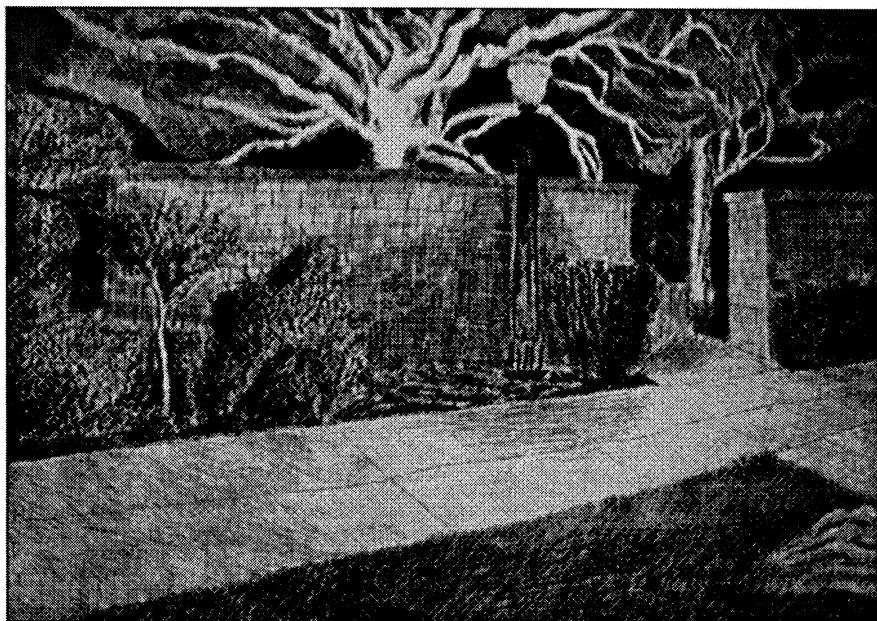
while you scrub  
oblivious to my effort  
as I see you through  
my reflection.

You again turn on the water,  
spitting loudly  
then walking out of the bathroom  
leaving the water to run.

By Kim Evans

# Memories

---



# Walking Jenn to Work

---

I've been slipping,  
my camo Coleman boots  
brining me back down  
the day care door's  
outside slope

Bringing Jenn, or trying,  
where she wants to go  
and slipping, hoping

She's making some money  
watching some people's babies  
bringing Wade a bottle, breaking  
open toddlers' diapers

But she's watching, now,  
knowing the dry spot  
like one good and hot,  
for cooking over a fire

She holds my hand,  
and I walk her to the door  
knowing she won't slip  
coming home

**By Jake Tolbert**

# Looking In

*for betsy*

---

Bed-blankets pushed back,  
slept in,  
balck green boxers  
plaid on the floor.

I want to reach out,  
smooth the creases of  
other people's lives,  
run empty fingertips

across overturned shoes  
through hidden coves of  
loose change and paperwork.

Baby hands crinkle at the edges,  
pulling my paper upwards  
into manila yellow crayon,  
traces of wax mingling with words.

Brown-green-blue eyes  
stuff pink sweater corners  
full in mouth,  
lost in the sea of

bold plastic  
remote controls  
misplaced socks and animal crackers.

I fold into myself,  
tripping over books and mittens,  
pressing my lips to the windows,  
my cheeks to the walls

holding the house up to me  
like a department store dress  
I can not afford to buy.

**By Kim Hunter**

# *Void Between Me and Wisconsin*

---

Today we spoke of the distance tapeworms would reach  
if they could be stretched out from the belly  
of a cow.

I feel the stone in my own stomach could be  
a tapeworm waiting to be laid out,  
marking the distance  
between you and me.

You send ink on indelible paper  
with warm questions  
and multiple peach stains  
A pit hardens in my belly.

If we stretched our veins  
in length they would circle the world thrice.  
I believe this  
for my veins travel now.

**By Mandy Watson**



# Found

---

I take out the trash: Mad Dog 20/20 bottles, empty packs of cigarettes, pizza boxes and Coke cans. The junk piles up at the bottom of the chute, some in white kitchen bags with neat little twist ties, some haphazardly tossed without any care to the person at the bottom who picks it up. Sometimes the bags break open like a pinata at a child's birthday party, spewing orange peels and coffee grounds onto all of the other bags; sometimes a pinprick hole leaks out stale beer or rotting hamburger juice onto my shoes. That's why I wear gloves. Big, yellow kitchen gloves you get at the grocery store for 99 cents. God knows, the last thing I want to do is touch this shit.

This apartment complex has 150 people, not counting dogs, cats and pet monkeys. Okay. So, only one guy has a pet monkey, and he's not really supposed to let it live here. No one is supposed to let their pet live here, but they do anyway. The only one who seems to mind is me, when a bag breaks holding kitty litter or monkey poop. Not that anyone cares if the chick from the 1F- the only super-efficiency in the joint- has to deal with monkey shit. Not that I even care all that much. I just keep thinking, this is only temporary right? Four dollars an hour that earns me enough to eat.

The owner of this complex has six other buildings. I do trash duty in all of them- each within a four-block walk. On Sunday, I do the bookwork for the buildings, arranging for electric bills to be paid and water heaters to be fixed. It earns a little extra. But it's the trash that is the closest to me.

At 4 a.m., when I get up to haul out the trash, I pull on cotton blue coveralls- the kind inmates wear on a prison work gang, and lace up my yellow construction boots tightly before walking the fourteen and a half steps to the trash room. I fumble for the keys, opening up to a tight, mechanical room where the heating units and sewer systems all converge. At the back end is another door to the outside. Here is where I take all of yesterday's trash from the chute to the dumpster for another real life garbage collector to scoop up and haul off to the city dump. It makes me feel like half of a person- an interloper in garbage land to touch all of these relics of somebody's yesterday life, and only move it a scant few yards, leaving the landfill unseen by my eyes. It's as though I only do a part of a job.

I open up the bottom of the chute, enclosed by a contraption rigged by a trash person of days gone by to control the odors that seep under the door and float, unchecked into the hallway and into 1F. I think the person before me must have lived there as well, and, feeling as though the stench were encroaching on all of his or her life, closed it off to keep out the pervasive invasion.

The night must have been good somewhere up the stairs. A beer stink and the unmistakable odor of vomit immediately assail me as I reach in for the first big bag of refuse. When I pull out the first bag, the balance is upset and everything else comes tumbling down unmindful of my presence below. Beer cans and wine bottles clatter onto my feet, rolling across the cement floor.

"Piss."

I utter the word under my breath as I chase a half-empty can of an impossible to pronounce German import to where it has rolled under a water heater. I reach under to pull it out, dumping the rest of the contents up my arm. I want to scream. I haven't had a beer in at least four- no, five- months and now I smell like warm, stale, premium import lager- the good stuff that I can't afford anymore. I'm about to toss the can across the room out of pure spite for the bastard who left half the liquid in it when I notice a jingling sound. It's the kind of sound an empty can makes when the tab has been broken off and dropped inside, only heavier, more musical. I pull my glove off and empty the last few drops onto my hand. The warmth feels welcome, friendly. I shake the can a little and the offending object slips into my hand with a thud. It's a ring. Not just any cheap drugstore ring or a delicate little dainty thing that girls who drive sporty cars wear. It's a rock. The kind of rock an accountant boyfriend spends three paychecks on to ensure his girlfriend will cook him three squares for the rest of his natural born days.

I look the ring over for any signs of recognition- an inscription, a manufacturer's mark. It's not a nondescript ring, with it's white gold band that twists like a flat rope from edge of stone to edge of stone. Thin lines like delicate wires cross up over the diamond, caging it effectively in a pretty little case. I wonder if the girl who wore this last night, under a thick haze import beer, looked at that caged little stone and saw her own self staring back. Is that why I found it at the bottom of a beer can, tossed out haplessly with the trash?

I slip the ring in my pocket, thinking surely she'll come looking for it today, sober and repentant, praying fervently that it hasn't been taken off to the great trash heap in the sky. Immediately, I reach for it again, feeling the heat of the metal still warm from my hand. I slip it back out onto my palm. My pocket is too precarious for such a precious thing. I pull off my other glove and reach up to unhook the other silver chain from around my neck, sliding the circle onto it before clasping the ends back together, and tucking it under the collar of my coveralls, close to my heart.

By 3 in the afternoon, I'm finished for the day. I let myself into 1F, pulling off my boots at the door. The living room is a cramped space, with one of those old pull-down beds that they glamorize on TV. Somehow, being able to tuck your bedroom into the wall seems a little less than glamorous to me. But it's sufficient, almost comfortable. I head for the shower, slipping my clothes off along the way. I've become accustomed to not worrying where things fall anymore. After all, it's only me.

As I stand under the warm, slightly erratic spray, I notice the weight of the ring again. Wet, the stone is all shiny and new, completely out of place resting against my body. It seems to magnify the way I feel lately- old and worn out. Especially old. I'm thirty-one, and sometimes I feel like life has been going on an eon around me. I look back and can't even see the beginning anymore. Worse, I can't see the middle. I don't remember their faces. Not a face, or a smile or a dimple, though Christine had one, I'm certain. Just vague impressions of existence viewed as through a cataract. The heaviness grows in my stomach, and I find myself trying desperately to push it away. As always. The trick is not to think too much, or for too long.



I turn off the shower, toweling off quickly and slipping into heavy flannel pants. The rest of the apartment is chilly, so I pull on a second hand Army T-shirt and head for the bookcase. It's always a long evening, so I should start somewhere to pass the time.

Days are long, and morning comes early- sometimes not early enough. But the usual insomnia didn't plague me tonight, and the insistent knocking is something I hear through a dense fog of sleep.

I haul myself off the couch, setting aside the second hand compilation of Virginia Woolf from my chest. The pounding grows more forceful and I find myself yanking the door open with unnecessary force. The guy on the other end looks like hell- generously speaking. He couldn't have slept in two, maybe three days, and hasn't showered in as many or more. A thin blondish growth darkens his chin and cheeks in an uneven, boyish sort of way, yet there is something definitely not boyish about him. In fact, his broad shoulders and thick forearms indicate heavy work- construction maybe.

"You the trash guy?"

I open the door fully. His eyes open a scant bit from their bleary slits.

"Sorry, lady. They told me the trash guy lived here." He turns to walk away.

"I am the trash guy." I realize that these are the first words I've said aloud in more than three days. The words seem foreign in my mouth, squeaky and unnatural.

"You? No way." A disbelieving, skeptical look crosses his face, as he looks me over like a child stares at one of those overlarge lollipops in a candy store.

The way he looks at me makes me uneasy, angry, and I snap at him.

"Look, what the hell do you want anyway?" He stands there stunned by my harshness. Slowly an uneasy look crosses his face.

"Um, look, I know it's late and I'm sorry, but did you happen to find a...um...ring?"

I had half hoped that the ring would remain unclaimed, resting between my breasts for a while longer, at least.

I look at him standing there, all disheveled and clearly penitent. I am torn. I want to keep the ring, make up the story everyday of how it came to be, and hold onto it as a reminder of the rest of the world out there. Yet I want to know why- why this man has come looking for this little treasure, why it came to be in my possession in the first place. Unexpectedly, I find I want this contact to last more than the few sentences that have already passed between us.

"Come in. I'm Karen."

"John."

I beckon him to the couch, heading to the cabinets to make a pot of coffee. He settles uneasily onto the couch, sitting on the edge, leaning his body on his knees while his feet shift nervously on the floor. The silence pervades the room, the only sounds are the shuffling feet and the perking of the coffee. For a long time, I let the silence reign.

"You look like you could use this." I push the warm cup into his hand.

"Yeah man, has it been a week." He sips at the coffee in a tentative, feminine way that contradicts all of the little that I know of him. I can feel the tingling this generates in my stomach, the way his lips on the coffee cup cause my breath to catch. I turn quickly away.

It strikes me that this guy hasn't said a single thing about the ring since I let him in. In fact, his feet have stopped twitching and he seems strangely at ease, leaning back against the sofa with the coffee cup casual in one hand. I chew the inside corner of my lip. Do I broach the subject? Before I get the chance, he takes over.

"Nice place you have here."

"Yeah. Nouveau cramped and Garage sale chic."

He laughs at this and some of the tension around his eyes disappears. He is a great looking man, in a purely aesthetic sort of way, of course. His laughter makes me smile and feel guilty. I reach down the front of my shirt to pull out the ring and chain.

"I found it in a beer can." I reach back to unclasp the hook.

"No. You don't have to do that."

I tilt my head questioningly toward him.

"Okay, I'll bite. You knock on my door in the middle of the night to see if I've found a ring, but you don't want it back?"

"No. I don't."

"Nasty break-up?"

"You could say that. She left me for another woman."

It dawns on me that maybe I'm not the right person for this guy to be talking to. I glance up to the picture of Ann on the refrigerator, to the bookshelf full of telling books. The signs of my life seem to radiate from every corner, and suddenly I am uneasy in my home.

"Oh," I whisper quietly, fidgeting on the edge of the armchair.

"It's okay, you know. I just couldn't handle the thought of her pawning off the ring to buy her new girlfriend a t.v or something."

I realize that this is a false front, and that he isn't okay with it at all. He himself looks uncomfortable in his own skin when he talks about her. It seems as though this would be the time to reach out and pat his shoulder or something, perhaps give this big defeated man a hug. Instead, I settle for words.

"You don't look like it's okay, buddy."

"No. Really. I suppose I should be all bereft or something, but the fact is, it's better this way."

"Oh. I see. Then why is it that you look like death on a plate?"

He smiles at me, all of the previous tension now disappearing like the hoarfrost in the morning sun.

"I've been on a bender for three full days. Wouldn't you look like hell, too?"

Remembering all of my own benders, more than I can count, I smile.

"Yeah. Sometimes a good bender is the best first step to getting over it all."

"You sound like an expert." He has leaned back, crossing his left foot over his knee, in a comfortable, easy sort of way. It's clear that this guy has settled in for a conversation. For the first time in months, I welcome the intrusion.

"Yeah, I suppose, but we weren't talking about me. So, what was her name?"

"Kristine."

The name fills my head, making me hold my breath. Christine. My own daughter's name.

"Oh." the word tumbles out, but my thoughts remain a hundred miles from there.

"She was wonderful and perfect and everything I ever wanted."

Yes. She was.

"And then, three nights ago, she told me that I wasn't everything she ever wanted. In fact, I couldn't even come close." His sarcastic laugh come out a little more bitter than he intended to let on, his cool facade slipping away for a moment. Then he reins control back in, and addresses me.

"So, what's your deal? What's a pretty, intelligent person doing hauling out the trash and living in this dive?"

"Intelligent? My aren't you one to draw conclusions without knowing much about my character."

He stands up, delicately balancing his coffee mug on the arm of the couch. He stops at the bookshelf and begins pulling out books, then reshelving them meticulously.

"Thoreau. Shakespeare. The Communist Manifesto. Sappho."

His eyebrow raises a fraction on the last one, and he replaces it more slowly than the rest.

"Most people in this building couldn't tell you who a single one of those authors are, yet you read them. That would be enough to assume intelligence, wouldn't it? So what are you doing here?"

This man has me completely pegged, completely cornered, and no glib remark or half-truth enters my mind. It's completely disarming, yet relieving to feel connected to another person again. Yet the words won't form easily, fluidly.

"I used to be a professor. Well, on my way to being a full professor anyway. English Lit. Winona State. Minnesota." I stop there, not willing to delve any deeper into my life. He reaches to a snapshot in a clear plastic frame, pulling it closer to get a better look. I don't have to see the picture to know every detail- the red candy-striped sweater that the woman wears, holding tightly to a baby in blue overalls. It's fall, the leaves in the background have turned a thousand shades of red, and the auburn of her hair blends somewhere in between all the colors of the fall. The baby smiles widely towards the camera, giggling at the insistent fingers poking at her ribs. The picture I have memorized, but the faces no longer seem real.

"Who's this?"

I knew the question was coming, but I still wasn't quite prepared for the words to rush out of my mouth.

"My wife. My child."

He turns and walks toward me, as though he misheard.

"My wife. My child."

I repeat the words, the disjointed unreality of it making the words foreign to my mouth, my head. For a long time he stands there, taking it all in.

I don't want to look at him, this guy who I felt pity for a few seconds before, who I know is now looking at me as though I am the woman his girlfriend left him for. The air is charged again, our common ground all but lost in my own admission.

I stare at him, closed off from me, his forehead furrowed in disbelief and distant pain, yet somehow I can't help but continue.

"They..." The words are far harder than I thought. After all this time...I take a shaky breath.

"They're dead." After the words tumble out, the rest pours forth unchecked.

"It was a fire. I was in the office late, working on an article I was desperately trying to get published. It was 2 in the morning when I pulled up, the fire trucks were already there, and the house was nothing but a pile of ash. They never felt a thing. They were gone before the flames ever reached the second floor. Ann was twenty-four. Christine never had her first birthday."

He's chewing the corner of his lip, staring at some invisible spot on the floor. His adamant refusal to look at me makes me, perversely, go on.

"Three years. Three very long years."

He abruptly breaks in

"So. You holed up here?"

I don't know what to say. I nod instead.

"Crazy dyke."

The anger boils up inside of me. Who the hell does this guy think he is? I can feel the red flush creep into my face, the fury bubbling to the surface.

"Get out." The words are so soft, that I think at first he doesn't hear me, as he doesn't budge. Then I repeat it, harsher, more forcefully, each word ground out through clenched teeth.

"Get out of my house." Still, no movement. I go to the door and open it.

"Look, buddy, are you deaf or dumb? Get the fuck out of my house."

I watch as he leans back against the couch, pulling one leg up underneath himself. His eyes contemplate his fingernails, his frown moving from anger to a deeper, gentler emotion. For a long time he sits, while I lean against the edge of the open door.

"When I was sixteen, my folks were killed in a car crash." He speaks so quietly, so simply. I let the door close, and lean against the wall to listen.

"I thought I was going to die too. There was no one- no grandparents or aunts and uncles to take care of me, make me understand. So I holed up in my room. My brother Bob just let me be. Then one day, he came into my room, threw me the car keys and told me to get out. Not forever. Just for a while. And so at nine thirty at night, I got in the car and headed for the coast. I sat on the beach all night long, staring at the ocean, thinking about my loss. Then, around dawn, the strangest thing happened. A cat, all jet-black and sleek, comes walking out of the surf. It walked straight past me, and disappeared behind the car. I got up to find this crazy animal, and it was nowhere to be found. I sat back down, and it happened again. Another cat walks straight out the the ocean, past me, and disappears. This time, I sprinted to catch it, but it, too, had vanished."

I can feel the tears threatening to overflow my eyes. Three years of anger and hurt and complete emptiness gather inside of me, and explode. Then, wordlessly, he stands up, tears glossing his own eyes and walks to me. As his arms reach around me, I realize that it's been three years since my last hug, as well. Three years since my last semblance of friendship. The physical contact is so completely welcome that I find myself

hugging him tightly in response. He pulls me onto the couch, and we curl up against one another. The steady beating of a heart other than my own lulls me to sleep.

When I wake, he is gone. At first, I'm certain it was a dream- some strange hallucination brought on by too little sleep. Then, I look to the coffee table where half a cup of cold coffee, the ring, and a note lay. I blink my eyes a few times, then reach for the paper.

Karen,

Keep the ring. Sell it and get the hell out of this dump.

John

I smile, and slip the note back onto the table. The ring glistens in the half-light of the room, and I pick it up, fastening the chain back on my neck. Maybe it's simply the weight of the stone that makes me feel suddenly alive. Then again, maybe not.

By Kim Hunter

## A Day in the Life of William Baxter, Driver

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He drove. Through the dry, brown, cornfields on route 149, William Baxter was doing about sixty. One arm wrapped behind the seat, his fingers were sifting through scraps of napkin, monster-sized lint balls, and Doritos particles. They were fishing for a tape that he knew was in the backseat somewhere. It was a mixed cassette—a bunch of songs he'd pulled off the vinyl now packed in boxes in the basement. He'd made a lot of these tapes. But this one was his favorite—three songs from Beggars' Banquet, a few off of Double Fantasy, and the better parts of Empty Glass and some Neil Young album. Stretching hard, he finally found it wedged against the metal parts that held the seat to the car. His head snapped up just as the car's nose overtook the post. A yield sign—directing traffic around a grass and weeds triangle. It all seemed so unnecessary. Luckily, no one had seen him. He just relaxed and resolved to be more careful. He popped the tape into the dash and drove on, listening to the hiss of white noise before the music.

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Decrepit barns of grey wood, chipped white houses, gnarled trees already shedding their October leaves—Baxter recognized them all. His weekends for the past six months had been bookended by two-hour-long drives south and then north. He always took the

same route, and it was always the same drive. Making a familiar right turn, he loosened his tie and, with one hand, clumsily undid a few buttons at the top of his sweaty, yellowed shirt. It felt good to be on the road again—to be going home. When Marie had left him, he really hadn't cared. She had become intolerable—entirely incapable of listening to anyone but herself. Only when he had realized that her leaving meant that Jacob was going too did he become concerned. Not that he cared all that much for the boy, but he would've felt guilty if he didn't see him at least once a week. Actually, he found Jake a mite boring; the kid didn't like to talk. He didn't read. He didn't know anything about music—well, nothing about music worth listening to. Jacob liked sports and girls and sticky candy. In his defense, he was only thirteen. And as Jake's father, he still had to love him. So every Friday night Baxter drove deep into the middle of nowhere to visit his estranged wife and his dull son at the mother-in-law's farm. Weekends like these made the nine-to-five at the mortgage firm seem like paradise.

Passing the junction with State Highway 29, he was fast approaching Robertson City. Baxter checked the dashboard clock—4:54. By his estimation, he had traveled almost thirty miles in around fifteen minutes. He examined the speedometer—sixty mph. Obviously a miscalculation of departure time. He must have left just a little ahead of schedule. Baxter flexed his fingers against the steering wheel, and, as far as it was possible, rearranged his bulk in the seat. It was unseasonably warm, and Baxter flipped on the air conditioning. The sun flooding the car was hot, almost baking his skin. He adjusted the visor and drove on, making sure that his foot was gentle on the gas pedal.

Except for running out of wiper fluid, the ride progressed without incident. A thin coat of dust and bug guts coated his windshield. Baxter had to squint through the grime. The setting sun made things worse—intensely bright. And hot. It felt like all he could do was sweat and drive. The wheel was slick and all of the dash console's knobs and gadgets were coated in perspiration. The air conditioning was cranked and its artificial, freon cold had long ago given him a headache. The caffeine withdrawal wasn't helping. His ulcer kept him from indulging in coffee and colas and almost everything else he enjoyed. Exhaling, he tried to get comfortable and, in an attempt to fend off sleepiness, turned up the stereo. Please allow me to introduce myself. It was the Stones.

\*\*\*

Baxter noticed a blinking yellow light atop a green sign. "It can't be," he said to himself. He was, by all estimation, at least forty minutes from the interstate. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Under his breath, he swore, "It's damn hot in this car." Desperately he tried to recall the last thirty minutes of his drive. His memory failed. The last twenty-or-so miles were like a void. The best he could conjure was a strip of grey divided by short dashes, at times a solid line. His guts felt like a sack of rocks. Had he fallen asleep? Maybe there was something wrong with the clock. Uneasily, he took the on-ramp.

On the interstate everything seemed normal. He kept an eye on the speedometer to make sure that he remained between sixty-five and seventy. Even at this speed, he passed every car he met. Within minutes he was alone on the highway. He couldn't see

anyone in his rearview; he'd left them all behind. Despite a momentary, irrational feeling that he was driving into some unknown doom that everybody but he had been warned about, Baxter was rather glad to be alone.

Marie and Jake had insisted that they rent movies. Hope Floats and Dante's Peak—a smorgasbord of schmaltz and destruction. And then they talked all the way through them. On Saturday, Baxter had to take his son to the mall. He sat on a bench for three hours while Jacob ran up the escalators the wrong way and pestered actual shoppers. At meals Marie's mom spoke as if he weren't in the room. He had been made to watch sit-coms. Marie still wanted a divorce. Jake wanted cash. Marie needed money.

By this afternoon he had been more than ready to leave.

\*\*\*

Baxter was staring blankly into the dusk—wondering why it was so hot—when he had to jam the brakes. Almost out of nowhere, twin red orbs had appeared in front of him. It was the first car he'd seen in a while. He moved into the left lane and began to pass. The other car sped up. "The bastard was doing forty until I wanted to get around. Now he's gonna speed up." He slid back behind the other car. Immediately it slowed down.

Furious, Baxter swung into the left lane again and was once more defeated. After a few more failed attempts, he gave up. Ahead of him the car plodded along. "Dammit," he muttered. "Goddamn sonofabitch." While Baxter was readjusting the air conditioning, he noticed—out of the corner of his eye—his opponent's license plate. TPF 3407. When he looked again, it was too dark to see. TPF 3407 was his own plate number. In fact, the other guy's car looked like it could be a Celebrity like the one he drove. He was tired and his mind was playing tricks. He found his Mylanta in the glove box and took a gulp to soothe his ulcer.

Ultimately, Baxter resolved to remain behind this other car and creep toward exit 240 at forty mph. He let himself do other small things while driving. Chief among these was constantly regulating the interior temperature. Baxter imagined a sweaty imprint of himself on the upholstery. He worried about Marie and kicked off his left shoe. Like the rest of him, his feet were damn hot. If Marie hadn't been such a pain in the ass, he wouldn't have looked at other women. It's hard to find someone attractive when all she does is complain. It's not like he'd slept with any of them. He just talked. Little things like that don't matter. She didn't like to talk anyway. Shit, he hadn't been a bad husband—just not a great one. He was human. He'd fucked up—they'd both made mistakes. Dwelling on it wouldn't fix the problem. As long as he kept going forward, everything was behind him.

\*\*\*

Looking up to check an exit number, Baxter realized that the car in front of him was gone. Had it exited without his noticing? He was relieved and let his sock foot lean hard on the pedal. He was almost home.

He was about twenty miles from his exit when light flooded his car. Some asshole

had his high-beams on. As he flipped the mirror, Baxter thought for a second that he recognized the car behind him. It might have been the same car he'd followed for all those miles. He didn't remember passing him. Straining his eyes at the rearview, he could almost make out the driver's face. The guy was following close. Baxter threw his head over his shoulder for a quick look. Remarkably, the man looked a lot like an uncle of his—perhaps even an older version of himself.

Baxter was somewhat disturbed when his pursuer took the same exit as he did. "More of those damn brights," he swore. The other car mimicked his every turn. The hair on the back of his arms was electrified; his evaporating sweat chilled him for the first time that night. He was afraid of leading the other driver to his home and drove around the block several times. Ultimately, Baxter decided to wind back to the interstate and leave the other car where he'd found it. He'd lose him and take another way home.

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He'd been driving for hours. He'd even done some swerving and weav-ing in an attempt to confuse his pursuer. Nothing worked. On top of everything, he felt this strange guilt—a hint that everything he'd done and was doing was getting progressively worse. He thought that he was driving on a spiral, circling round and round. Outside the windows, the same scenery passed repetitively. Inside the car it grew increasingly hot. He thought he could smell something burning. He hoped it wasn't the air conditioning. All of the exits looked the same. And, of course, the unceasing high-beams in his rearview mirror. He had wanted so badly to overtake that car, and now he wished it had never happened.

He looked at the clock. 11:47. Baxter didn't know if he could believe it. Who knows how long he'd been driving? Trying to get away from whatever it was behind him—the damned car. He saw a sign indicating he was quite near the Wisconsin border. It was just up a little farther. A billboard advertised an all-night diner. Some eggs might be nice. He hadn't eaten since lunch. He'd wanted to get away from Marie and Jake so badly he'd left before dinner. Bea's Diner, the sign said—part of a truck stop. Baxter was hungry and didn't want to drive anymore.

Perhaps he should just take a break from this cat-and-mouse routine. Stop and get some food and let what happens happen. He was going to be damned if he was going to run from himself for the rest of his life. He took the closest off-ramp and pulled his car to the side of the road. "Enough of this," he said as he hefted himself from the car. He didn't want to drive any longer. He'd walk. He sucked night air and wriggled into his windbreaker. He started walking along the deserted road, uphill in the direction of the diner. He fumbled in his pants pockets. He had some change. Maybe enough to call Marie—maybe. Whistling and looking at the trees, he wondered if he were in Wisconsin yet—if the other car had followed him. No matter. He watched his breath stream from his mouth. A nice warm meal was ahead of him. He was able to relax. It was much cooler out here.

**By Daniel Fitzgerald**



# Biographies

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**Matthew Armstrong:** is a junior chemistry major from Springfield, IL. He plans to teach high school chemistry and likes to play guitar.

**D.M. Attrape:** "So may the outward shows be the least themselves."  
- William Shakespeare.

**Tara Coburn:** is a sophomore English major.

**Steve Drake:** I draw whatever comes to my head. I like to use ink so that I can't erase anything if I mess up. If I do make a mistake, I just draw new things off of that. Since none of my drawings are planned, they are created from the mistakes.

**Kim Evans:** is a senior environmental biology major.

**Wendy Finch:** I am a 2-D Studio Art Major in my Junior year here at Eastern. Besides being a member of Epsilon Sigma Alpha and Phi Alpha Eta, I enjoy drawing, observing nature, and volunteering in the community.

**Daniel Fitzgerald:** Reports of his greatness are greatly underrated.

**Kim Hunter:** (still) a senior English major. She aspires to someday live alone as a maiden aunt, maintaining nine cats and her sanity.

**Brandi Kinney:** I am a mystery.

**Kathryn Kolasinski:** I am a senior graphic design major.

**Jennifer Lund:** I am a senior graphic design major graduating in May of this year.

**Nicole Smith:** is an English and Creative Writing major; "Deal with abuse."

**Jake Tolbert:** I thought a lot about this bio, and I decided that the only thing I wanted people to know is that I am dedicated to Christ. I am not spectacular at proving it, but, at the expense of sounding cheesy, I love Jesus Christ.

**Mandy Watson:** is a senior English major with an art minor.

**Sylvia Whippo:** is a senior English major.

**Autumn Williams:** I am a Junior English major from Iola, Illinois.

**Erin Winner:** I am a sophomore English and Math major.

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